

# SUSPEND DISBELIEF

An exhibition  
of new works from  
Stuart Semple

16th — 20th  
October

Open: 10 — 7

Deep beneath the hills of the Lake District, poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was shown, via the visions of an opium-fuelled reverie, a strange, bleak and violent world called Xanadu, a place haunted by ancestral ghosts and demons and submerged, completely, by shadow. Crashing through this world, carving its way through the flesh of the very landscape, was *Alph*, Coleridge's most tumultuous imagining, a sacred river running, steadfast into a black, sunless ocean. In this disorientating land, however, Coleridge's protagonist, *Kubla Khan*, builds a most stunning construction - a pleasure dome filled with exquisite flowers and trees, with caves of glistening ice: filled with magic and impossible spots of sunlight.

In this dome, the violence of *Alph* and the darkness of *Xanadu* are cut out completely - ignored in entirety - and replaced by a fabricated perfection. In 1817, Coleridge coined the phrase "suspension of disbelief," a term embodied by *Kubla's* dome that, ultimately, means to succumb to a lie and to pretend to believe in the unbelievable in return for pleasure, entertainment and, at times, peace.

*Suspend Disbelief* is artist Stuart Semple's first London exhibition in four years. It is, too, his most ambitious, both philosophically and technically, to date. The notion of suspending one's disbelief is a prevalent theme throughout and appears in two strands. First, there is the idea of a conscious



suspension of disbelief whereby we indulge ourselves in lies - in fabricated characters and worlds - in order to enjoy and be affected by literature, film, theatre and other forms of entertainment. This strand appears in works such as *David Copperfield Saws Himself in Half* (2013) and *Effect* (2013). However, most significantly, Semple, secondly, explores the larger notion that aspects of our disbelief are, in fact, in constant suspension; we build pleasure domes around our fragile lives, surround ourselves with entertainment, culture and, ultimately, magic, in order to separate



ourselves from the facts of our mortality: in order to untangle life from death and cloak ourselves in happy, care-free denial.

The majority of the works in *Suspend Disbelief* deal with the use of entertainment, pleasure and illusion as means of coping and continuing happily in life; they act, in a way, like pleasure domes dotted across Semple's *Xanadu*, enabling us to indulge in life away from any hint of darkness, as exemplified in *Bloom* (2013) and *Jump* (2013). However, what Semple understands, as Coleridge did also, is life's closeness to death. "Once we accept death - that we are all dying every day - we can really start living," explains Semple. "Then, we can suspend our disbelief and enjoy things truly with the knowledge still there, and the acceptance, of death." In Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, *Xanadu* represents what Semple, here, explains: that life and death exist symbiotically and that the latter, although we can choose to ignore it, surrounds us.

## Stuart Semple

*Omega* (2013), a sound installation comprising of one hundred strung-up radios swarming around a light bulb, provides a similarly dark backdrop to Semple's exhibition as *Xanadu* does to *Kubla's* pleasure dome. Emitting from each speaker is the white noise found between

beginning and the end: of birth, life and death. It draws the audience to the brink of mortality in preparation for the constructed pleasure - the suspense of disbelief - that is evoked in the rest of the exhibition. It acts as a reminder in *Suspend Disbelief* that every life encounters death, a premise that the



stations, a sound that contains leftover reverberations from the Big Bang. *Omega* represents the very beginning of time, but also, considering the theory that time is cyclical, plays the sound of the end of the universe too. The piece simply surmises the togetherness of the

audience can choose to either leave behind completely or continue to return to.



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4 Hanover Terrace,  
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